

“Living a Life Worthy”

Rev. Melissa Potts-Bowers
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 5, 2012

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 51: 10 – 17

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 4:1-7

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Ephesians 4:1-7

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. **7** But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Living a Life Worthy

Joke about the Presbyterian gossips... "Context is everything" Well Paul is giving some advice about living from our faith in different contexts. In this scripture passage, he addresses working with others in unity.....and imprisonment.

Avoid it. Can there be anything good about being in prison? Paul begins our section by reminding his listeners that he is a "prisoner in the Lord" (4:1). However, as Paul sees it, his frequent stays in prison are never without purpose. He does not simply refer to himself as a prisoner but as a "prisoner in the Lord". We might consider imprisonment to be a "waste" of time because it inhibits our freedom to do what we want to do. But Paul has a different perspective. Even confinement does not diminish his energy for his mission in life: to proclaim Christ. Indeed, he even reports to the church of the Philippians that his imprisonment serves to spread the gospel of Christ. Perhaps there are some lessons that might be drawn from an enlightened imprisonment stay: It is worth noting that stays in prison can often hone understanding and insight. Letters from captivity (like Ephesians or Philippians) are profound meditations on the meaning of faith in the midst of suffering and exclusion. We can also point to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison, or Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning.

The continental wide apartheid movement in South Africa was led from prison by Nelson Mandela, who suffered a lengthy prison stay of 35 years. Aun Sun Su Ghi in Myanmar (formerly Burma) was held under house arrest for 15 years, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her leadership in matters of human rights in her home country. Somehow, there's a great power that can come from imprisonment, if we will see it.

The Shoes of the Fisherman—story was a best seller in 1963 and became an Oscar winning movie in 1967. Inspired by the true story of a Ukrainian archbishop who was called out of captivity at the request of Pope John XXIII. Metropolitan Archbishop Kiril Lakota is called out of 20 years of hard labor in Siberia. The KGB Agent who interrogated him and sanctioned him to Siberia is now the premier of Russia. Father Lakota is amazingly lacking in resentment – his captor says, “what have you learned in 20 years of captivity”? Response: I have learned that if a man loses touch with love in his heart, in his being, then life becomes a burden that is too hard to bear. His captor then asks, “have you learned enough to face freedom after 20 years of captivity?” Oh, I have always been free – not entirely, of course, but free enough in my soul that I have been captive to no man.” In the story he goes on to eventually be elected pope and yet loses touch with the common man – he always sees himself in servant hood to the people. His imprisonment served to deepen his faith and strengthen his character – although he did not know it, it was the school that God enrolled him in to prepare him for this incredibly important mission – the school of imprisonment shaped him to remain steady and strong in any circumstance. Michael's prison story – cross and 1999. In that prison cell, he became free of the shame and guilt that kept him away from God. Now his relationship with God is deep, authentic, and intimate. He says, “every day I find time to be alone with God – I take time to talk to God and mostly to just be quiet – to listen.” How about other kinds of prisons? Have you ever been trapped in a situation, a relationship, a predicament, a commitment that felt like prison to you? The loss of resources, of independence, of choices, of flexibility? And the examples of people who were able to use their captivity as a wisdom school, a discipline, an adventure into inner space, a deeper trek into their purpose can give us great inspiration and hope. God cares about our pain – God really does, and can provide healing and peace beyond what we can even imagine when we ask for help with our pain. But God cares even more deeply about our purpose – the purpose for which we were created and the specific mission that we've come here to do. In our captivity – whatever form it takes - the prayer request – the one in which we ask God to really use our time in captivity to bring us closer to him, to fulfill his purposes and to give us a closer walk with him – that prayer request is responded to powerfully and with immediacy. So when we have resisted enough our captivity and we see that there is a larger hand in this situation that creates our confinement, it's time to stop struggling and instead to become quiet, listen, and let the Master Crafter reshape it more fully into His image.

In this letter, Paul also talks to us about unity – unity in the spirit. That message is as relevant now as it was then – in a culture that asks first “does it make me happy” before it asks “what is really needed”? Being in unity means working and living together as a group, in relationship. Privatized, individualistic faith is very popular these days – enjoying the benefits of faith without having to put up with other people and the potential for conflict. Paul uses a series of poetic “one” statements – “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” indicating that we are also to be one body in Christ. Easier said than done.

Yesterday in the KC Star Faith column: Rev. Holly McKissick addressed a readers' question about whether she can faithfully live a spiritual life without participating the community, the group – she says, “not if you are a Christian”. Christianity by its nature is a communal faith. She says that these days being SBNR – spiritual but not religious – is very popular! If we're not careful, it can become a code-phrase for “doing what makes me feel good regardless of what is really needful” or not letting issues and conflicts with our community challenge us and shape us – just avoid it altogether by saying “I'm SBNR - spiritual but not religious – and instead of dealing with people and situations that we don't like – just don't! It seems to work for awhile, but it eventually takes on awful toll on the progress of our spiritual growth, and it's a very incomplete practice of faith. Christians are bound to a life in relationship – you can't do Christian faith all by yourself”. Living in “the unity of the spirit” reminds the hearers that living the life, responding to the call starts with abandoning arrogance and ego-struggles with others (4:2). If love generated the call in the first place, which Ephesians keeps emphasizing - then love determines the way we live, our attitudes towards each other.

The Colmans, retired from the Air Force, settled down in 1986 to enjoy the beach and their boat. But they were called into relationship with some special needs boys who needed a scout troop that would move at their pace. The Colmans only expected to do this for a year or so until another, more permanent leader could be found – now their troop is celebrating its 25th anniversary! The boys range in age from 18 to 53. And their goal is to become Eagle Scouts – and they do. The only limitation lifted for them is the 18-year age cap. They earn every merit badge, and fulfill every requirement that any other Eagle Scout fulfills. And the boys earn it with the dedicated help of Richard and Claudia Colman. They are most proud of their oldest Eagle Scout. It took him 21 years to complete his requirements, but he did it. Richard and Claudia say that at first they felt like they were doing a good turn, helping, doing a favor to these special Boy Scouts. Now they say, “they just members of our family”. I don't look toward a retirement date anymore – not anymore than I expect to retire from being a parent or grandparent.- We are all in it together now. The idea of unity in Ephesians is not about a huddled unity, which keeps itself safe, a unity that shores up borders and clearly delineates “us” and “them”. This is an expansive and open unity - one that knows there is no them – it's all US! This is so because its understanding of God is like that. God is clearly personal, but also able to be thought of as being like a fluid, which flows through the entire universe. A positive relationship with God opens us to all of life. It is not about withdrawal or escape. Christ's body becomes an image for dreaming about the goodness of God filling the whole world. It is like Christ is a large body which keeps expanding as it incorporates more and more of reality and brings more and more of it into unity, into union. (both with the body and with all other realities).

An icon, which represents the communion service – the body and blood. Jesus is in the cup - the holy meal is the reverse of an earthly meal. As we partake of an earthly meal we assimilate it into our bodies, and the meal actually becomes US. We assimilate the nutrients and our bodies create cells like itself. The earthly meal becomes us. The holy meal instead assimilates US into itself.....The - meal which is Christ's body and blood – Christ's very presence and life – when we partake of it assimilates us into itself, so that WE become the body of Christ. Lets prepare for communion....